

## **ALIGNING THE MEANING OF LEAN: BOUNDARY SPANNING AGENTS IN THE TRANSLATION OF MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on the boundary spanning strategies of intermediate agents involved in the implementation of Lean Management in hospitals. We show how these boundary spanners translate the meaning of this management concept across different hierarchical levels and how they shift strategies as a function of their intention to achieve acceptance or implementation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, we find an increased research focus on how management concepts circulate in the environment (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and how these may impact management and organizational praxis (Abrahamson, 1996; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Damanpour and Aravind, 2011; Volberda, Van Den Bosch and Heij, 2013). Many studies have highlighted that the boundaries between specific contexts are integral to understanding the flow of management concepts and that overcoming these boundaries requires processes of translation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Røvik, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). With its focus on how concepts are made locally meaningful to specific organizations, the translation perspective has moved the actors involved in the consumption of such concepts to the forefront of inquiry (cf. Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud, 2011). Yet this perspective has maintained a focus that is primarily on the boundaries between higher level meanings and their instantiation in local practices. In this, managerial actors, as archetypal consumers of management knowledge, have been assigned a dominant role (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016). Such top-down approaches have limited our understanding of micro-processes of meaning construction and negotiation (Gray, Purdy and Ansari, 2015). As a result, the extant conceptualization of the intra-organizational flow of management concepts provides an incomplete theorization of how alignment is achieved between meanings at higher levels and lower levels.

To address this issue, we use insights from studies on the role of intra-organizational boundary spanners. As the roles and practices of intermediate actors in translation processes have received far less attention than managerial agency (Balogun, Gleadle, Hope Hailey and Willmott, 2005), we suggest that taking the perspective of boundary spanners as analytical lens might help to develop a richer understanding of the intra-organizational dynamics between different hierarchical levels in the translation of management concepts.

## AGENCY IN TRANSLATION

In response to neo-institutional models of diffusion, a growing stream of research on the impact of management concepts has shifted focus towards processes of translation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Røvik, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008), drawing on insights from Actor-Network Theory as developed by Law (1986, 1991), Latour (1986, 1987) and Callon (1986). Despite the variation in definitions of translation (van Grinsven, Heusinkveld and Cornelissen, 2016) the main thrust of translation as a perspective lies in recognizing that concepts do not remain unchanged as they move from one place to another, hence the approach “firmly accept[s] variation and change as [being] inseparable from the way in which practices are transmitted” (Fiss et al., 2012:1096).

The translation approach has highlighted the importance of local settings to understand how concepts are adapted with a resulting change in practice (Munir, 2005; Zilber, 2006), and we see an increasing consideration of how concepts accepted at higher levels of analysis are translated as they move to lower levels (cf. Morris and Lancaster, 2005; Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud, 2011). For instance, Zilber (2006) studying national and organizational levels, explores how institutional meanings are translated from broad socio-cultural frameworks to specific, industry-related rational myths. Reay et al. (2013) investigate managerial efforts to translate the concept of teamwork from the organizational level to the local circumstances of the front line. Similarly, Ansari et al. (2014) analyze how managers may draw upon multiple strategies to balance the tension between standardization and variation as a concept is instantiated across the different subsidiaries of an MNC.

With its focus on how concepts and ideas are made locally meaningful, the translation perspective has stressed the significance of studying agency (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009), which has moved the actors involved in the consumption of such concepts to the forefront of inquiry (cf. Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud, 2011). At the same time, prior studies have maintained a focus primarily on the movement of higher-level meanings to lower levels and their instantiation in local practices (Gray et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is little research studying the roles and practices of internal change agents, as most studies focus on managerial agency (Balogun et al., 2005; Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016). These top-down approaches and the dominant role of managerial agency have limited our understanding of micro processes of meaning construction and negotiation (Gray et al., 2015).

## BOUNDARY SPANNING

Our account of the prior literature on translation shows a conceptualization of the intra-organizational flow of concepts within which managerial decision makers are assigned a dominant role in the translation process whilst there is limited reflection on the roles and practices of internal change agents (Balogun, 2005). In order to address this issue, and in line with Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) we seek insights from studies on the role of boundary spanners and apply these to the translation of management concepts.

The literature on boundary spanners highlights the importance of certain key individuals in dealing with the challenges of managing knowledge across boundaries (Cross and Parker, 2004; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Hargadon and Sutton, 1997). Boundary spanning may facilitate the flow of knowledge across geographical, organizational and departmental levels, simultaneously spanning physical, cultural and political boundaries (Sturdy, 2009). The term,

which has been used in the organizational literature for over thirty years, is defined as “positions that link two or more systems whose goals and expectations are at least partially conflicting” (Steadman, 1992: 1) and due to their unique location in the organization, boundary spanners are simultaneously exposed to these competing expectations (Perrone et al., 2003: 423).

A recent strand of literature has looked at the role of individuals spanning intra-organizational boundaries. Whereas previously this predominantly entailed studies directed at R&D functions linking their subunit to other organizational functional areas (Katz and Tushman, 1979; Tushman and Scanlan, 1981) a wider understanding of intra-organizational boundary spanners has started to emerge. Kostova and Roth (2003) for instance, illustrate how boundary spanners are responsible for linking internal rather than external activities (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Tushman and Scanlan, 1981; Zaheer et al., 1998) and they show how a central role is played by certain key individuals in the formation of social capital between the headquarters and subunits of an MNC. Also, middle managers have been argued to perform a boundary spanning role between top management and the rest of the community in an organizational context (Mantere, 2008). Similarly, Balogun et al. (2005) show how boundary-shakers endeavor to draw on specific practices to build networks upwards, laterally and downwards, enabling them to alter their context of operation in order to extend their discretion. Drawing on this broad literature, we define a boundary spanner as an individual who acts as a mediator between different intra-organizational levels. Yet, in line with Balogun et al. (2005) our focus here is on boundary spanners who are charged with the implementation of a concept, which involves making changes accordingly.

The literature on boundary spanning critically emphasizes the role of individuals at the intersection of different levels and the simultaneous downward and upward flow of concepts. Whereas most studies on translation explain how macro level concepts are instantiated in local practices, the boundary spanning perspective provides an opportunity to develop a richer understanding of the intra-organizational dynamics between different hierarchical levels in the translation of management concepts.

## METHOD

Our research was designed to investigate how boundary spanners contribute to the local translation of management concepts. We chose to study the adoption of Lean Management in the context of Dutch hospitals. According to its main propagators, the main idea of Lean is to bring ‘value to the customer’ and Lean principles imply the constant maximization of customer value and the elimination of wasteful activities (Womack et al. 1990; Morris and Lancaster, 2006). Well known techniques comprise just-in-time (JIT), one-piece flow, 5s-workplace standardization, KANBAN (pull system) and value stream mapping (Benders, Van Grinsven and Heusinkveld, 2014).

Notwithstanding claims on the universal relevance of the Lean (Womack and Jones 2003, Morris and Lancaster, 2006), transferring Lean to healthcare is a relatively new phenomenon (Burgess and Radnor, 2013; Graban, 2009). In Dutch Healthcare, the first explicit, yet still limited, applications of Lean commenced around the start of the new millennium (Simons, 2014). Hospital-wide implementations of the concept started in 2006 (Benders et al., 2014). The implementation of Lean principles in a number of pioneering hospitals constituted the basis for a still growing movement around Lean in the sector as it is today, and the foundation of a national network (LIDZ: ‘Lean in de zorg’ - Lean in Healthcare) in 2011. Currently, the network has over

60 member organizations and is considered an established movement that initiates a variety of activities to promote the core philosophy and principles of Lean.

The primary data sources for this study were interviews with key individuals and observations of so called 'Gemba Walks'. We delimited our study to the 38 Dutch hospitals as members of the network, as these are most advanced in their application of Lean. In each of the hospitals we interviewed the individuals (at least partially) responsible for the implementation of Lean in a hospital context. Most interviewees had been with the organization from the initial introduction of Lean and were able to provide a rich chronological account of the evolution of the concept. In total, 45 interviews were conducted. Even though the implementation managers were from different corporate-level functions, the majority held staff-support roles and were in direct contact both with top-level managers and with employees on the work floor. Before and during this period, also some exploratory interviews were done at the network level to gain a deeper understanding of the context at stake and to invite comments on our nascent findings. These interviews were conducted in a timespan of 1,5 years (July 2014 - January 2016).

Because research on what happens within organizations during processes of concept adaptation remains in a nascent state (Gondo and Amis, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2010), we conducted an exploratory study with an abductive approach as we engaged in "a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data" (Wodak, 2004: 200).

## FINDINGS

As we analyzed the data, the concerted efforts of boundary spanning individuals reflected an orchestrated set of strategies to align top-down and bottom-up initiatives. In particular our findings showed that these could be grouped into four general categories: (1) Positioning; (2) Obtaining understanding; (3) Meeting expectations and (4) Leveraging distance. Furthermore, we found that boundary spanners carefully balanced specific forms of these general strategies either to achieve acceptance, or active participant involvement in implementation. In the following sections, we discuss and illustrate how each of these general strategies are balanced and applied as a function of acceptance and implementation (see Gondo and Amis, 2013).

### Boundary spanners aiming for acceptance

According to Gondo and Amis (2013) the acceptance dimension of organizational adoption relates to whether an abstract practice diffusing across a field is more or less accepted by change participants. Our data show that in the translation of Lean to the local context, boundary spanners indeed focus initially on getting the board to accept the concept. When the concept originated on the work floor, or was introduced by the boundary spanning agents themselves, significant effort was directed at getting top-level management to accept the concept as a valuable contribution to the organization. In doing so, agents utilized and sustained a certain level of unconscious engagement by top-level management, in order to make room for lower level initiatives.

*Positioning (Negotiating consent).* Positioning is an important strategy boundary spanners display when it comes to enrolling top-level management to the change cause. It is related primarily to influencing the role of these top-level managers in the process of the concept being introduced. When aiming to get the concept accepted at this level, boundary spanners appear to employ strategies aimed at cajoling approval to introduce the concept. Energy is

directed at getting management to say yes, not primarily at making them understand the workings of the concept.

*Obtaining understanding (Energizing through informing).* A second strategy associated with gaining acceptance is related to acquiring an understanding of the concept amongst top-level managers. In order to do so, agents engaged in a strategy of energizing through informing. They hand-picked specific and successful examples of in-house application to advertise them to the board of directors in order to establish a certain level of enthusiasm.

*Meeting expectations (Meeting 'old' expectations).* A third strategy related to generating acceptance involves meeting extant expectations by applying the new concept. This generally entails that agents specifically addressed the expectations by top-level managers as being expressed in the corporate strategy.

*Leveraging distance (Creating distance).* A fourth strategy associated with gaining acceptance of the board is related to leveraging the distance between the board and the work floor. In order to gain acceptance for the concept of Lean, we see that despite their efforts to achieve a certain level of acceptance, boundary spanners also aim to get some distance between these hierarchical levels. One informant notes that Lean not being an official program allowed him to maneuver without too much interference from above. Another informant stated that she kept an intentional distance from her managers initially, as she was concerned they would draw premature conclusions before really understanding the meaning of the concept.

### **Boundary spanners aiming for implementation**

In contrast to acceptance, the implementation dimension of organizational adoption relates to whether those adopting a concept do so in a more or less conscious manner (Gondo and Amis, 2013). As Gondo and Amis note, the “characteristics that make a practice more easily accepted also reduce the conscious engagement needed for its implementation” (2013: 229). Our data show that once acceptance among top-level managers has reached a certain threshold, a shift occurs in how our agents approach top-level managers in order to enroll them for their cause. The lack of conscious engagement that, until then, had been carefully been sustained is now seen as a risk. For each of the general strategies distinguished before, we show how boundary spanners now use them to achieve active involvement.

*Positioning (Encouraging to take (new) position).* When it comes to enrolling top-level managers to the change cause, boundary spanners exhibit a different realization of the positioning strategy when aiming for implementation. In contrast to the phase of acceptance, where these intermediate agents directed energy at getting management to say yes, in the implementation phase, their efforts were directed towards encouraging top-level managers to take on a committed position in relation to the concept.

*Obtaining understanding (Deepen understanding).* A second strategy directed at implementation, is related to obtaining an understanding of the concept amongst top-level managers. In order to do so, agents engage in a strategy of educating to achieve a deepened understanding of what the concept entails. Whereas agents were primarily concerned with energizing through informing in achieving acceptance, in this phase they are not just trying to generate enthusiasm by showing off compelling examples, but they teach the board what the concept of Lean really means. One of the informants specified that she is taking the board of directors to the work floor to show them the *real* system and not just the things that look nice.

*Meeting expectations (Negotiating 'new' expectations).* In contrast to the acceptance

phase, the strategy of meeting expectations does not involve just meeting extant expectations by the application of the new concept, but is aimed also at negotiating new expectations. This generally entails that the intermediate agents maintain to address the expectation of the board about the contributions of the concept, but simultaneously try to establish a shift in these expectations to also get them to include a wider interpretation of how the concept may contribute to the organization as a whole. Interviewees explicitly acknowledge the necessity to accomplish a shift in the expectations the board has of the concept for it to be locally meaningful, but also emphasizes the difficulty in doing so.

*Leveraging distance (Bridging distance).* A fourth strategy associated with implementation and directed at achieving a conscious engagement from top-level managers is related to leveraging the distance between hierarchical levels. More specifically, the data show that in contrast to the acceptance phase, boundary spanners aim to reduce or bridge the distance between top-level management and the work floor.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper we argue that the top-down approaches that prevail in the prior literature on management concepts, have limited our understanding of micro-processes of meaning construction and negotiation (Gray et al., 2015). Using boundary spanners as analytical lens yields a richer understanding of the intra-organizational dynamics between different hierarchical levels and holds a number of key implications for the translation of management concepts

First, our findings show that a more complete understanding of translation processes requires a focus on the interactive dynamics between top-level management and the front line. As such, our study urges management concept scholars to spend more attention on the pliable and distributed character of translation processes and to go beyond the emblematic perspective by which higher level meanings are assumed to be translated to lower levels unidirectionally.

Second, by showing how the role of boundary spanners may be unraveled into four distinct general strategies, this study contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of agency in the translation of management concepts. By illustrating how boundary spanning agents may draw on strategies related to positioning, obtaining understanding, meeting expectations and leveraging distance, we show the critical importance of agency in the spreading of management concepts, and in doing so reinforce questioning the institutional model of diffusion (Scarbrough et al., 2015; Lounsbury, 2002; Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016).

Third, we found that boundary spanners balanced specific forms of these general strategies either to achieve acceptance among top-level managers, or aimed or active participant involvement in implementation. Gondo and Amis (2013) reason that unintentional decoupling may be a response to adoption if acceptance is high and the level of conscious reflection during implementation is low. We show that unintentional decoupling among top-level managers may be an initial and intentional strategy of boundary spanners in order to sustain the development of front line initiatives without interference from above. As such, our study shows how different translation efforts may be distinguished, and may shift as a function of acceptance and implementation, contributing to our understanding of how meanings of concepts are aligned.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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